DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 794 CS 203 293

AUTHOR Smith, Ron
TITLE Freshman English: The New Crisis and the Old Solutions.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); Educational Needs; *English Instruction; *Graduation Requirements; Higher Education; *Program Improvement

ABSTRACT

The new crisis in freshman English is reflected in recent resolutions by the Modern Language Association and by individual colleges and universities to reinstate composition requirements. Too many composition programs, however, are a waste of money and time which traps the composition teacher into accountability for students' success or failure. It is generally true that not all students need as much writing work at the college level as blanket requirements suggest, that not all teaching in writing courses is especially good or efficient, that not all writing courses are designed to achieve the maximum result for dollar spent, and that too little effort is given to the construction of writing courses. The institution of requirements, however, does not ensure that students' writing skills will improve. What is more important is a general commitment on the part of teachers and administrators to real learning and improvement in composition. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Ron Smith

ED137794

FRESHMAN ENGLISH: THE NEW CRISIS AND THE OLD SOLUTIONS

"Too soon ve get old; too late ve get schmardt." I've been living and working in Utah for almost 12 years now, so my knowledge of saloons, once as impeccable as my youth, is probably out of date. In fact, I know it is. Why, when the world and I were young and vision was never clearer than it was inside a barroom, I recall that many of those places in my New York home town and elsewhere had walls quite literally plastered over with provocative signs--signs of all shapes and sizes, each of them encapsulating some portion of mankind's hard-learned wisdom, like "Too soon ve get old; too late ve get schmardt." Now the way I figure it, my Utah reclusiveness dangling for all to see, is that those signs have gone the way of the ads that told us "More doctors smoke Camels than any other brand." Few people anymore know, it seems to me, that "Too soon ve get old; too late ve get schmardt." They go their ways, do many people, making the same old mistakes, oblivious or ignorant of the wisdom of that sign, apparently unaware of their mortality. I can hardly believe anyone would willingly make mistakes or overlook mortality, so I've concluded that they just don't know the sign, that the sign just doesn't exist any longer. The only reason I mention it here is that many of us in the profession called "English" seem not to learn our lessons very well either and just go about getting old soon and smart late, periodically needing others' reminders to us that we are mortal. You see, there's something of a new crisis in Freshman English and a few too many people who don't even know about it, a few too many who have never seen the sign, a few too many who will no doubt in due time need chiding for their mistakes and reminders from others of their mortality. Not everyone in English, mind you, just enough to be makers of a problem that could once again be the communally shared albatross of the profession at large.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ron Smith

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

CS 203 823

My first indicator that there is in fact a crisis in Freshman English came last year at this time when a session I chaired at the 4 C's convention in Philadelphia had in attendance all of 12 people, half of whom were no doubt there only to rest their feet, seeing, as they passed the open door, half of a ballroom filled with alluringly empty chairs. Now, I'm not saying that poorly attended sessions are a sign of a crisis. Not at all. Those of us who have attended conventions often enough know that occasionally there are sessions which just do not draw well. Because this particular session turned out to be one of the most informative I've ever taken part in, though, it was a shame more people weren't there to hear the speakers. The session was entitled "No Composition Requirement: How Does It Work?". As I came to realize too late, it was the right session at the wrong time, a session which offered an alternative view to those who cared to listen, and as I did, learn. More on that later, though.

The second indicator that there is a crisis came when I read the MLA Newsletter dated May 1976 and discovered that among four resolutions ratified by the MLA membership was the following one:

> Whereas college students throughout the country seem to exhibit a marked lack of competence in writing, be it resolved that the Modern Language Association recommend the reinstatement of the freshman composition requirement in colleges and universities that have dropped the requirement or allowed literature courses to supplant it.

I'd taken part in the Freshman English Forum at the MLA convention at which the Delegate Assembly of MLA passed that resolution but was totally unaware that there was such a resolution for passage in the first place. Well, that was my fault. I should've known better than to think that when MLA had so suddenly broadened its convention concerns as to acknowledge the existence of Freshman English for the first time that I can recall, it wouldn't also go about demonstrating questionable expertise on some pretty complex matters.

Anyway, reading about that resolution in the May issue of MLA Newsletter almost on the heels of the session I'd chaired in March on the no composition requirement situation and how it worked made two like instances, to my way of thinking, that pointed toward a new crisis in Freshman English, a crisis precipitated by our strange devotion to the word "required". But since then there's one more solid indicator of the crisis that came to my attention.

I wonder if you too haven't noticed that there's been a considerable, ongoing debate over "The Student's Right to Their Own Language." Despite the fact that both the Conference on College Composition and Communication and its parent organization, the National Council of Teachers of English, have taken the position that students do have a right to their own language, quite a few articles have shown up in the journals which, in their independent ways, chip away at the position and, in general, deride it as so much foolishness. This chipping away constitutes my third indicator that there's a new crisis in Freshman English, and, as will eventually be seen in the course of my ramblings, adds considerable evidence to my assertion that we in the profession called "English" are especially prone to growing old soon and smart late.

At this point it's necessary that I rehearse with you some history--most of it during the past decade and all of it familiar. As is fairly well known, in 1967, just 6.8% of all institutions of higher education surveyed by Thomas Wilcox had no composition requirement as such. Just six years later, in 1973, according to the results of the nationwide survey of four year colleges and universities I conducted, 24% had none--quite a significant increase in schools having no composition requirement in a relatively short span of time. In 1967, 77.8% of the schools Wilcox surveyed required two terms of composition. In 1973, just 45% of those surveyed did. The years between 1967 and 1973, and even for a while after, were obviously lean years for composition programs and people in the

composition-teaching business. Budgets and staffs were cut, requirements were dropped or reduced, equivalency testing burgeoned. Now that things have changed--our wares, composition skills to go, moreso in vogue than they have been for some time, and matters concerning composition programs generally on the upswing--now that things have changed, some of us are inclined to look back upon those lean years as Jews must look back upon the years of Auschwitz and Dachau. In a way, I suppose, that's not a bad analogy, for if ever there was a pogram during the long history of Freshman English, it was in the earlier 1970's that it happened. The trouble is that those among us who learned little or nothing during those years are no doubt seeing what happened in Europe to the Jews and what happened later here to composition programs as blitzes carried out by madmen, failing to see that while there can certainly be no moral justification for the pogram of Jews that was carried out in the Third Reich, there may well be a few valid reasons for the pogram of programs attempted by some administrators later on.

You may recall that mixed into the hopper of years between 1967 and 1973 were, among other things, the following problems facing administrators: a rapid growth in school enrollments accompanying the wider spread of open admissions around the country, budgetary problems--particularly when enrollments began leveling off, a sudden emergence of competency testing used on a broad scale, the elimination or drastic revision of lower division requirements, and what some would argue was a general diminishment of standards. In the air were also at least two notions commonly held by administrators that had heavy impact on us: first, that entering students were better writers than former such students had been and, second, that writing requirements at college level were not producing a measurable result equal to the expense of operating programs meant to assure that all students were writing adequately at college level.

Of the first of these two notions not much need be said except that its foolishness has now been repeatedly exposed in print and on the air by everyone

from Paul Harvey to Max Rafferty, many of the comments inspired by the clarion blasts that were carried in the August 25th and December 8th, 1975, issues of Time and Newsweek respectively. We professionals had long known that no such thing was happening as that students were coming to us from high schools better prepared as writers, something the articles in our journals as well as papers read at meetings ever since the early 1970's will attest. If anything, many of us were beginning to think the people teaching English in high schools were falling asleep at the switch, lulled by the easy access to college that open admissions provided, and were no longer teaching writing.

Of the second of the two notions commonly held by administrators during the years we remember as lean, though, much must be said, for in telling us that writing requirements at college level were not producing a measurable result equal to the expense of operating programs meant to assure that all students were writing adequately at college level, administrators were stating a fact that had and still does have applicability at a great many schools. Too many composition programs are simply a waste of money. They always have been and they always will be as long as we professionals insist on being led around by the nose because we either think for ourselves or are told to think that the only way to assure that all students who enter our schools can write well enough is to impose a composition requirement of anywhere from three to nine hours. It occurs to too few people, least of all administrators, that a composition requirement is only as good at any school as the overall faculty's commitment to writing is strong. That is to say, the only schools where students write well upon graduation are those schools where students must know how to write well because they will have to write well regularly in most if not all of their classes. Where they don't write regularly in that way, whatever skills they leave the composition requirement possessing tend to atrophy at an alarming rate. Then, who's to blame for students who can't

write well by the time they graduate? Right. The people in the composition program for not having taught them how. Now you know what I mean when I say many of us are led around by the nose. Now you know what I mean when I say that we in the profession called "English" seem especially prone to growing old soon and smart late. Now you know what I mean when I say there's a new crisis in Freshman English right at a time when the recent trend seems all in our favor.

I frankly believe that a great many people who teach composition at college level are so addicted to the necessity of a composition requirement that they would not for a moment tolerate what that great encyclopedist/philosopher of the French Enlightenment, Denis Diderot, said: "I have enjoyed all sorts of things in life; books, women, pictures, friends, controversies, science, and toasting my toes before a fire. These are the things that count." The people I have in mind would of course take exception to Diderot's omission from the list of things that count fulfillment of the composition requirement. I only wish they would take as much exception to letting students complete the requirement without the assurance that the students will be exercising what they've learned at every turn the rest of their college days and thereafter. Then I wouldn't be so concerned that one part of the new crisis in Freshman English is falling into that old trap, well documented by many before me, that can only lead to another cycle wherein we're suspected of not having taught anything in our composition classes.

It should come as at least a small surprise that I think the MLA resolution mentioned earlier--the one recommending the reinstatement of the composition requirement wherever it's been dropped or replaced by literature courses--as a superbly timed gesture, coming as it did just a few weeks after the article in Newsweek called "Why Johnny Can't Write." It had to have an impact since it showed the profession's concern with the decline in writing skills. Superbly timed, yes. But nonetheless the product of an ill-informed group. Of all the people I've

been in contact with either during or after the nationwide survey I conducted in the Fall of 1973, the ones who have had most to say that taught me anything were those people at schools where the composition requirement had been dropped and who were living nicely with the no composition requirement situation. It is not always or even usually that they had found it easy to live in that situation but that they'd figured out how to make it work. And what they'd unanimously found was that once it did work, there was no need for a requirement because students felt compelled to know how to write. That compulsion without a requirement is obviously not necessarily a necromantic trick beyond the ken of most people in composition as much as is shifting the responsibility for student writing from the English department to the faculty at large.

I told you just 12 people heard the speakers in that session I chaired last March in Philadelphia--the session called "No Composition Requirement: How Does It Work?" All four speakers verified that no composition requirement can work. And just 12 people chose to hear about it. Do you think I was kidding when I said we're addicted to the necessity for a requirement?

But that addiction is only one part of the new crisis in Freshman English. It's the other "old solutions" that need amplification now.

Because I don't see all professionals as in the group which didn't learn much during the lean years, I'd like now to point out what I think they've learned that the others haven't. In that way, you should be able to see clearly what the others ought to know. For one thing, the ones who have learned that even though some gross misjudgments were probably made that led to the leaner years, there were also assorted judgments made about their inefficiencies by administrators that were more or less correct. Among the judgments were these: (1) that not all students need as much writing work at college level as blanket requirements of two or three courses might suggest; (2) that not all teaching in writing courses

that are required at college level is especially efficient, motivated, or even competent; (3) that not all required writing courses at college level are designed to achieve the maximum result per dollar spent on them; and (4) that too little effort is given toward the construction of service writing courses in too many instances. The fact that they've learned these things is evident in dozens of ways--far too many to cover here, but let me mention a few: in variable credit courses from which students can graduate when they have gained the necessary skills, in the significant changes that have taken place in the English major that indicate better preparation of teachers of writing, in the development of writing courses which acknowledge the students' right to their own language instead of simply forcing them into the prestige dialect, in the veritable boom in technical writing courses (some of them inter-departmental) to answer the need for true service courses, in the development of uniform grading practices, in the recent growth in number of learning and writing skills centers to provide students with services when and where the services are needed, in programs which have rather remarkable cost and learning efficiency, and in the decisions made at many schools to be sure that only well trained and thoroughly motivated professionals teach writing. These are just a few of the changes that have come about, mind you. Yet there are no doubt schools where all the old solutions are being employed to get back to the basics as demanded by those who are outraged that "Johnny can't write." At them are being built the only thing people who didn't learn much during the blitz know how to build--monolithic programs the vast majority of students who enter are destined to hate, requirement fulfillment programs which will cost far more to maintain than they can possibly deliver, programs, in other words, which will end up being blamed for all the old sins Freshman English has for many scores of years been blamed for.

There's more that needs saying, so much I've said that needs greater developing. The surface I've scratched covers a great many issues related to a core

I've identified as being the new crisis in Freshman English. We're just at the start of that crisis, since as a new part of an eternally recurrent cycle, it is no more than 14 or 15 months old really. There's time to set it aright. There's time to avoid the stigma of growing old too soon and smart too late if you really want to and if what I've said marks you as squarely in the middle of the new crisis. What it will take is guts, a facing up to reality if you prefer. It is neither a display of guts nor a facing of reality simply to fall in with that old line of thinking, the one that suggests that the only way to be sure students can write well is by levelling our guns at them in the form of a "requirement" right at entrance or by establishing an obstacle course for them to run in due time or by insisting on their need for learning the prestige dialect--all this as though there is no other way to go about things, no way of showing that we've learned that the old solutions whatever they be may well be a trap we've been led into by the nose, wherein eventually we'll be found, albatross and all, once again.

--Ron Smith
Department of English
Utah State University
Logan, Utah 84322